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EDITORIAL

'Retaliation'

THE internal debate within the Reagan administration over the issue of terrorism — whether to retaliate in kind against terrorist actions — has not been clarified by reports that the United States has aided the Salvadorean Army in retaliating against guerrillas purportedly responsible for the June 19 murders of six Americans at two outdoor cafés in San Salvador.

Indeed, the Pentagon's handling of the matter raises more questions than it answers. Moreover, any intentional or inadvertent exultation by Washington about "retaliation" against the guerrillas, if in fact such an incident took place, seems misdirected. There can be no denying the military necessity for Salvadorean forces intercepting, arresting, or, if necessary, destroying hostile antigovernment forces in a combat situation. But it is quite another matter, and more troubling, for the US government to seem to be publicly promoting the destruction of alleged assailants who may or may not have been involved in a prior terrorist incident.

The antiguerrilla incident in dispute took place in El Salvador in late June, when, according to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Salvadorean troops, aided by US intelligence reports, attacked encampments of the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party, which had taken responsibility for killing the six Americans.

Secretary Weinberger told the Mutual Broadcasting System that "with our assistance [El Salvador] has taken care of, in one way or another, taken prisoner or killed . . . a number of the people who participated" in the June 19 killings of the Americans. A Pentagon spokesman later backtracked from Mr. Weinberger's comments by saying that the defense secretary had not meant to imply that the guerrillas killed by the Salvadorean forces were the "actual trigger men" in the café shootings. Rather, he said, they were merely members of the guerrilla organization that had claimed responsibility.

Now, what's going on here? Secretary of State George Shultz, it might be recalled, has been calling for a swift US response to terrorist actions against the US, even if "there is a potential for loss of life of . . . some innocent people." Secretary Weinberger, by contrast, has urged caution and restraint in the use of military force, including retaliation. Has Mr. Weinberger now moved closer to the Shultz position? Or was he merely speaking off the cuff regarding the Salvadorean antiguerrilla operation?

If this was a retaliatory incident, the words of a Salvadorean military spokesman have a particularly unpleasant ring to them: The 21 or so rebels killed in the operation, he says, "weren't the ones specifically responsible for the attack" on the Americans at the outdoor cafés back in June.